

Peyton

It was Thursday night. We were all sitting on the couch talking about our futures and what we wanted the next year to promise us. New Years was approaching faster than the next minute. MTV Jams was playing some throwback R&B tunes so the mood was laidback. Surprisingly we had all gotten off work early and met up at Tyrone's house. His white mother never really gave us too much flack for coming over and being melodramatic at her home. White people seem so friendly all the time. I knew if this was my grandmother's house my friends wouldn't make it to the door. I never invited anyone over anyway, my grandma was a borderline hoarder and well there wasn't much space for more than two people and all of her belongings. Tyrone's mother was married and very much interested in our lives because her husband lacked personality so she was terribly bored. After grabbing her last glass of cabernet wine she said her goodnight and left us in the living room to sort things out. Three forest green 40 ounce bottles of Mickey's Fine Malt Liquor sat on the coffee table. We all looked tired but happy to be able to relax with one another. Life got in the way sometimes and your best friends usually were the ones who were neglected. My anxiety disappeared being around them at that moment because my life had become a blur. I was following my heart down a dark alley that promised a torturous ending.

Xavier definitely needed this moment the most, I could tell by how big his smile was. He wanted to make the best out of every second he had. His baby's mother and his 4 month old son left to see her great grandma so he didn't have to be a father for the weekend. Tyrone wore a tank top to show off his new lion tattoo, which looked amazing on his beige skin. Sherane had nothing new going on and she made sure to remind us the entire night that she was bored with

her life. All of us in our early 20s and just desperate for a breakthrough and for some change, but never had the time to escape our lives.

“Where does time go? It seems so damn arbitrary. We get caught up in the mundane routines of work and having sex and drinking beer and boom, another fucking year rolls in. I mean I remember like yesterday last New Year’s Eve and all the bottles of Hennessy,” I leaned back with my head tilted and a scandalous grin growing on my face as I began thinking about that night. It was indeed one of the best nights of my life. I had met the most beautiful woman that God had ever created. He couldn’t have made a more perfect human being. Every time I saw her it was as if she grew prettier by the second. Even her name was beautiful, Peyton Monroe. I had to shake my head left and right to recover from the thought of her. The last time I saw her we didn’t end on good terms, actually I think we may have ended. I wanted her to reach out to me. For some reason I could never break down and show her how weak I was for her.

Back to the conversation Sherane started talking about her possessive boyfriend and how it used to be cute, but now it was bothering her.

“Y’all Darrell be pressin’ me when I leave the house in my pajamas to go get him some food. Like come on dude. Pajamas. And on top of that I ain’t even brush my damn teeth. So not only am I out here looking like Freddy Kruger, my damn breath smells like hot ass. I just can’t deal anymore,” she swore as she picked up her phone to send a text message to him. Xavier began venting about how being a father at 22 years old made him realize that sex is never that good and he will never not use a condom ever again

“Well good thing I’m gay. I don’t have that problem,” I teased him and Sherane gave me a high five.

“Whatever Symone! Fuckin lesbo,” he choked back. We filled the room with laughter.

As they went on with the conversation trying to figure out how two women had sex, my thoughts had me reconsidering things. For some reason, the last New Year's really did feel too close for comfort. It made me wonder what the hell I had been doing all this past year that made time go by so quickly. Before I could even ponder the many moments that had come and go, my phone vibrated and there was a text message from Peyton that said *I really wish you could grow up. I wish I didn't need you. I wish he never found out.* I stood up to go to the bathroom. The hallway became blurry and I scratched at the wall in search of the light like I had never been inside that bathroom before. I took five deep breaths and my hands started sweating. In that moment my entire body felt as if a skyscraper was crashing down onto me one piece of sharp steel at a time. I felt tears swell inside of my face, but froze because my pride was stronger than any man. The heat from the confusion of her words shook me up and brought me back to the room just to hear Tyrone mid speech.

“...ya feel me. Nigga, I ain't even trying to sound cliché, but it's definitely about to be New Year, new me ya dig? Cause I was playing too many games last year. But pass the drank Sherry,” Tyrone protested as he brushed his waves with his left hand while reaching for the brew in his right. He was the biracial dude who always added a little flare to his words and approached every situation so gangster-like as if he had to prove to us that he was more black than white. Sherane gave him a sip of her drink because his pockets were light. Xavier tapped me on the shoulder and whispered, “This the same shit he said last year” and he and I laughed.

I had just finished my beer and was feeling pretty good, minus the text message I received 20 minutes ago. I hadn't responded just yet. In fact I wasn't even sure I could respond to those words. *I wish he never found out.* So why did he? We had kept this secret for almost a year and it just so happened he found out right after we have a big dispute. Then my cell phone

vibrated again in my breast pocket, but this vibration was constant so that meant it was definitely a phone call. Could it be him?

And it wasn't. It was my boss.

"Hey, is this Symone?" An alert chipper woman said on the line.

"Why yes, yes darling, it is! How may I help you on this fine Thursday night?" That was definitely the liquor talking mixed with the excitement of my boss being on the other end of this phone call and not a six foot ten man who had just found out about his wife's lesbian love affair.

"Hey it's Braxton. Your boss?" She clearly forgot she gave the entire staff her phone number at the meeting last week. She was our new head manager at the gym I worked at. She looked like she played every sport imaginable.

"Sorry for calling you at 10pm but look uh something came up with our opener and we really need you to come in. So see you at 5:30am tomorrow?"

At this point all I could say was "Yea. See ya."

"Who was that?" Sherane asked mid swallow of the remainder of her drink. Xavier stopped playing his game on his phone and awaited my response. Tyrone had his head down and earphones in. He was rapping Kendrick Lamar's song "She Needs Me" and had completely checked out of the conversation and the rest of the night.

"That was my job. I have to go. Sherane, can you take me home? I'll give you gas money," I asked as I started to get my bag and set my alarm for the next morning.

Sherane rolled her big brown eyes and started standing up stretching. She had such perfect dark skin. The melanin God definitely blessed her.

"Girl, you ain't gotta give me no damn gas. You live 3 blocks from me. Besides I need to get going anyway before Darrell starts trippin'. You ready?"

I woke up to both my grandma and my alarm screaming in unison for me to get up for work. All I could think while getting ready was that today wasn't supposed to start so damn early. I couldn't decline the hours though. I could use the extra cash.

As I zipped up my hoodie, steam escaped my mouth. I ran down the stairs from my grandmother's apartment. I hadn't been outside for more than 5 minutes and my fingertips were numb; I realized in that moment everywhere I went was cold. It was 32 degrees in California and the only reason I stayed here was because it was supposed to promise a constant 80 degrees and my grandma swore I wasn't old enough to know how to survive on my own.. In four months I'd be 24 and by June I would have finally finished my undergrad at the state college, but she was always in my ear saying "You need to stay close to me."

The wind felt like a hand slapping me awake as I rushed toward the bus stop with two untied shoes. I bent over to tie them and a raccoon escaped the shadows and ran up a tree. My skin crawled and I changed my walk to a slow trot. There were 3 dirty mattresses that were stacked on top of each other. An end table with missing drawers and green graffiti on the side of it sat next to a huge mound of dog shit. A tree hovered over the sidewalk as I approached the corner where the bus stop was. As I wiped the crumbs of mucus from the corners of my eyes, two small dogs ran toward me with villainous smiles. Their teeth were sharp and glowing in the dark because although it was 5am the winter provided darkness until 7am. One of the dogs had a limp and a dirty white mane that covered its eyes. The other dog was clearly the leader of the two "man" pack and his champagne colored fur and miniature frame reassured me that it was in fact a Chihuahua. The wind made a few leaves fall onto the ground. Startled, the leader dog turned around in an attempt to investigate. He walked up to the leaves sniffed them and barked. His balls were huge for such a small dog. He returned his pissed off attitude back in my direction. I

never understood the point of these dogs. The dogs had such angry and loud barks. The barks echoed off of the apartment buildings and the empty street. I still wasn't sure why I was the target of their anger. I wondered if I had disturbed them. Perhaps they were making love and wanted to be the only ones on the block at this hour and I had intervened unintentionally.

At that very moment, Peyton's text message flashed in my head like the fluorescent OPEN sign at the donut shop across the street. What could I possibly say to make things better for her? I had ruined her family, unintentionally.

I should have never approached her. Once I saw the dull diamond ring slightly tilted on her left index finger, I should have made small conversation and left her alone. But I was unable to resist the Colgate smile and the thickness of her lips and thighs. The way she pronounced every multisyllabic word, the fact that she even used big words, was a clear indicator that she was indeed articulate and smart. So the curiosity grew in my womb. When we exchanged numbers I felt pregnant instantly. When we first kissed I felt my baby forming. Now that I was in love with her, now that the baby was here, I could not abandon her. But what could I possibly say to make her feel safe?

The questions and the thoughts poured in on me heavy like bullets in a war zone. The barking and the growling grew to be too loud.

"Get the hell away from me!" I finally bolted out. The dog with the limp backed off. It was still barking but clearly understood my frustration. I found myself getting upset that my first act of retaliation wasn't working on the other small creature. So I put my over packed backpack down onto the bus stop bench and ran at the dog like a bull to a red flag. Intimidated, the dog sped off to catch up with his partner who got pretty far in the small amount of time considering its disability.

I felt accomplished and awake. I turned back to retrieve my belongings and stepped into the street to see if the big red bus was making its way down Seventh street. Nothing. Nothing but a crack head whizzing up the street on a creaky beach cruiser. He waved and flashed a flirtatious smile revealing his mouth. He only owned a top row of smoke stained teeth. I imagined he and his feign friends arguing over who would take the last hit from the pipe. He being the victor paid for it by receiving a fist to the mouth, but being too high to care.

As he passed me by he yelled, "Good morning darling. The bus will be here in about I wanna say 10 minutes. Just be patient. Have a blessed day."

"Thanks man," I replied. I was sure he didn't hear me. He managed to get a beach cruiser to do about 10 mph. I laughed but that was pretty impressive. I stepped back onto the red curb. The KFC across the street could use some remodeling. Right above the F there was a hole where a few pigeons decided to make it their home. There was bird shit dried up and stuck in its dripping motion all over the F. I definitely wouldn't want to eat there after looking at that sign.

I sat down in disgust. Everything around me was dilapidated like that KFC sign. There was a trash can right next to the bench but the streets were riddled with all of the litter instead. There were soda cans sitting crushed up and cuddling the bottom of the curb. Those cans turned into money, once the Mexican guy that pushed the old baby stroller made his daily round. On the stroller there were at least 4 or 5 black trash bags tied onto it and filled with recyclables. There were a few of the \$1.49 hot Cheetos bags accumulating near the gutter. A flattened paper cup with the Coca-Cola logo on it was once filled with strawberry soda because dried around the rim it was bright red. A banana peel, some pennies, a beanie, thick black gunk, and a hairy green lollipop were amongst the group of litter.

I always noticed in the white people neighborhoods, the gutter had a screen covering it. Protection. Here, anything that wanted to get into the sewer could and would. The bench was freezing. The red metal soaked up the cold from all of last night and now shared its coldness with my ass. It startled me at first, but my body was tired so I remained sitting. I got used to the chill. A thick trail of ants scurried along the red part of the curb. They were probably scooping up all the crumbs from the Cheetos and taking them to their nest. I always admired their obedience. Even with my foot in their path they maintained their positions following one after the other and curved around my foot. A Chevy Impala on the opposite side of the street stopped and rolled down its window. A great sound system echoed its lyrics of profane poetry and rhythms into the atmosphere. I nodded my head in approval. A few car alarms went off as the car zoomed past. A helicopter was approaching. Its propellers comb through the sky as the pilot appeared to be going in a circle with a light zigzagging through the neighborhoods.

The street lamp needed a new light bulb. Every two minutes my spotlight disappeared and I became a part of the darkness. I decided to stand up and check again for the bus. It felt like 10 minutes passed already. When I stood up I saw the bus approaching.

“Thank God. Damn I need to get a car already,” I said as the street lamp came back on and showered me with light which I was grateful for because my entire outfit was black and dark blue. With no sun in sight and my hazelnut skin, I was sure the bus driver would have passed me by.

“Good morning and thank you,” the bus driver recited these words like a robot. Throughout the day when I rode the bus I often wondered where everyone was going, but at 5 in the morning that question answered itself, work. The man to my right was slouching and breathing hard. He seemed frustrated. His Jack in the Box hat was tilted to the left and his feet

alternate with one another tapping on the floor. He probably regretted going out and partying hard last night. Whiskey was escaping his pores and his mouth. His uniform was dingy and had small spots of white and yellow on it. A woman with salt and pepper colored hair had huge bags under her eyes. Her caramel skin had black freckles in huge amounts decorating her mature yet very beautiful face. She had on nurse scrubs. They were purple with daisies printed on them. I headed to the back of the bus.

As I sat down, the bus driver pushed onto the break too quickly and it sent me forward almost hitting my head on the pole.

“Sorry,” he yelled with no concern or emotion. I shook my head hoping that the 10 minute bus ride would end soon. As we were driving, I looked out to the right and noticed that Peyton’s street was approaching. Peyton. How was I going to approach her? Should I? Should I just disappear? Was that what the text message was telling me to do? But I was always running away from something: finishing school, my alcoholic mother, depression, ex-lovers. The list could go on.

I loved her. I didn’t want to run away.

Originally, we weren’t supposed to fall in love. The very first time we got a chance to be alone we knew it was wrong, but I was Eve and she was the apple. Her hips and thighs were the serpent and they spoke to me. I had a constant thirst for her. It was a passion that the sun couldn’t absorb. The chain of events that led up to this God forsaken love affair were atypical in that there were no lies or hidden agendas and in a way that made the bond stronger even though the hurt hit harder.

“I’m married. He’s all I want,” she would say as she pushed me away after a kiss.

“I believe you,” I would respond with a stiff throat.

I didn't expect her to leave him for me. I mean I was drowning in my own life and who was I to try to take her away from her lifestyle, no matter how unsatisfying and routine it was. She was safe with him. I was okay with being her mini vacation on the weekends.

"I'm married," She'd say on Monday.

"I want him," She'd say on Tuesday.

"I'm married. I love him. This has nothing to do with him. This is my own thing I'm doing," She'd say on Wednesday.

"I miss you," She'd say on Thursday.

"I'm married," She'd say on Friday morning.

"Do you want to come over?" She'd ask on Friday night.

After convincing herself all week that it was him she still craved, on Friday she would give in to the ghosts of my lust and the desperation in my voice from the distance.

"You have owl eyes," she would say right before she'd look away and blush. I never really had to tell her how her face made me look harder. It didn't make sense how her face was so well constructed. Cheek bones higher than the Himalayas. Lips more full than the Pacific Ocean. Skin smoother than desert sand. I was always stuck by how perfect she looked to me. Nothing was missing and nothing needed to be added.

"You only want me because I'm pretty," She'd swear.

"Yea, pretty... fuckin awesome. Girl you're amazing" I'd say smiling uncontrollably. Then our hands would lock and look like piano keys.

I exited the bus and was met with the early morning air once again. The streets of the city were so calm at 5am. I could run to the middle of the street and just stand there, but the car that passed by doing double the speed limit instantly removed that thought. Everyone did something

they shouldn't be doing when they thought no one was looking or paying them any attention. I checked my watch to make sure I was on time. It was exactly 5:15am. I took my keys out of my back pocket and unlocked the door to the facility and began to check the restrooms and locker rooms. I turned on the music inside of the fitness center and all of the lights inside of the studios. I unlocked the door to the pool and changed the channel for the TV in the lobby to ESPN. The sign clearly taped on the front of the TV read PLEASE DON'T CHANGE THE CHANNEL. It was now 5:30am and we are open for business.

The regulars that arrived bright and early were always so happy to come in and start their day by breaking a sweat, which was definitely inspiring. I flashed those smiles and encouraged them to have fun but I was slowly becoming lost in my thoughts of Peyton. The down time didn't help at all because now all I could think about was the last time I saw her. I wanted so badly for things to seem like they were perfect between her and me, but the reality of it all was it wasn't. Things were bad.

It started off so unique and realistic soon turned into desperate nights and flailing insults that hurt both our feelings, ultimately creating a crack in the already shaky foundation. I was too insecure. She was too insecure. I hated that she shared a bed with him and so I found myself running away any chance I got. She hated that I was so quick to jump off the bridge into another reality without trying to talk out what it was that was bothering me.

We used to talk on the phone for hours on end and I was fine with that, but then I got greedy. She got greedy too. We would find ourselves angry at each other for deciding to focus on more important things than being locked in each other's arms.

All the love was becoming lost. Sitting at the front desk I couldn't help but think about her, but not having the courage to respond to her message because I was afraid of how it would

hurt me to know she could no longer be mine. So instead I sat like a coward holding on to her in my thoughts, remembering the last time I heard her voice.

“You made me fall in love with you,” she said as the smallest tear sizzled down her cheek, her face hot from jogging to the beach and running up and down the stairs. We decided that in order for us to be happy that meant spending as much time together as possible. Even though each second we spent outside of the bedroom, was filled with “Fuck you” and “You don’t really give a fuck about me”. We literally knocked the wind out of each other every chance we got, whether it was from bloated blasphemies ejected from our mouths or kisses that hit the bottom of our stomachs making us shiver and light headed.

She stood with her right foot hoisted and knee bent, her forearms rested on the safety bars at the top of the cliff overlooking the approaching waves. The wind made her curly strands of hair run across her face. I raised my head like an apologetic puppy, hoping she wouldn’t need a response. She’s as predictable as a politician’s lie, so I knew that in that state of vulnerability she would want my words to run loose and hug her. But in my mind, this whole scene was just a way for her to break me. I was known for playing it cool. I was known for breaking on the inside, but building layers of concrete on the outside. She knew it.

So in a competitive tone I insisted, “I didn’t even think that was possible. I figured since you belong to him, this would all be over in a blink of an eye.” And just like that, a tsunami of rage rumbled at the core of that sweet honey crisp of a woman. Bruised from me opening and closing the doors to my heart, she asked, “Do you know what could happen in a blink of an eye?”

I bit my lip taking in the strength of her features. She shook me with the coldest stare, her eyes as black as a raven began to penetrate parts of me that had been neglected for some time

now. No longer leaning on the safety bar for support, she stood five feet from me. The moonlight cascaded her full figured body and her silhouette projected itself onto the cemented ground. At the center of it all was her nose, strong and sensitive to the bullshit I kept sprinkling around the home she longed to build for us, and her nostrils flared creating a crease between her brows illuminating the intensity that's buried inside her heart.

“No. What can—“I started to ask but she interjected. I felt everything in me stop working. I felt the need to regain my dominance, but she had me by my imaginary balls. My throat started to tighten as her eyes were digging into the layers of my skin. She blinked several hard blinks and took a breath filled with disgust almost asking herself, mentally, why she fell in love with me.

“Symone, I could blink and once reacquainted with my surroundings, you could no longer be standing in front of me with eyes that kiss and arms that wear my name. See in a blink of an eye this could all be over. You. Me. This. Do you know that I try my hardest to never keep my eyes closed for too long? Because I'm afraid of losing you. I know you're capable of leaving me. And sadly the way things have become you're turning me into you. Don't you see that?”

Frozen by how real she was in this night air. Panicking because although it was poetic and it made me horny, I was spooked. For the first time in my life a woman had me afraid to walk away. In that moment we had changed places because I began to feel what she felt every day, physically isolated.

An older Asian man stomped up the stairs with his glistening face tilted downward. In an attempt to regain control of his breathing, his hairy hands grabbed his knees and he's folded over.

Perhaps he felt us staring, because he looked up with eyes filled with embarrassment.

“You ladies be safe out here, I damn near killed myself,” he said. A nervous smile crept onto my face and I looked back at Payton to see if she was smiling too. But instead she rolled her eyes and turned around grabbing the waist of her sweater. Instead of saying good-bye the man says in the middle of standing up and wiping a bead of sweat from his face, “What we do to get what we want.”

He jogged toward the darkness and an approaching faint headlight on the road.

Word Count: 4,818